

# Employee Perceptions: Climate Report for the Easton Area School District Easton, PA 18040

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### **Introduction**

The Easton Area School Board sought employee input regarding their perceptions about working conditions in the Easton Area School District. As stated to the employees, “It is the intention of the

Board to gain insight into the perspectives and attitudes of the district's employees regarding school and district climate.” The Board acquired the services of Dr. Angelo R. Senese to conduct the survey and process the results. Dr. Senese met with a sub-committee of the Board to develop the survey statements to which employees could share their perceptions. The Board approved the final version of the survey and all full-time employees gained access during the second week of August.

The survey was designed to solicit employees confidential input about the Easton Area School District climate, communication channels, and day-to-day working environment. The survey was made available to all employees in every category of employment. By mutual agreement, the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and chief financial officer were not participants in the survey. The survey instrument contained eight key areas of interest on which the Board wanted employee feedback. Specifically, the Board sought perceptions about communication, employee engagement, beliefs about change, employee sensitivity about being part of a team sharing mutual respect, the district focus on planning including, but not limited to vision, mission, and beliefs, district improvement, working environment, and district governance. Provisions were made for employees to provide narrative comments.

The Board wanted to be certain that the employees responses were confidential and no one would be able to see any individual electronic responses. The precautions taken against anyone being able to identify any individual, included but not limited to:

1. The survey was not distributed via the Easton Area School District. It was distributed to employees through the consultant's technology. The platform was set-up to not report any identifiable information.
2. Any employee requesting to complete the survey via a hard copy was given one. The employee sealed the responses and the hard copy was mailed to the consultant.
3. The consultant was not able to identify any employee response.

After meetings with the sub-committee and then Board as a whole, the following understanding about *climate* was determined.

What is School climate?

While there are many definitions, this one from an article written by Steve Gruenert an assistant professor in the department of educational administration at Indiana State University at the time of this publication seems to capture and simplify the concept.

*“School climate is a term that has been used for many decades. Its early use denoted the ethos, or spirit, of an organization. More recently, school climate is thought to represent the attitude of an organization. The collective mood, or morale, of a group of people has become a topic of concern, especially in our new age of accountability.”* (School Culture/School Climate: They are not the same thing. NAESP 2007. Retrieved August 2, 2018

<https://www.naesp.org/sites/default/files/resources/2/Principal/2008/M-Ap56.pdf>)

Climate surveys are snapshots in time attempting to capture perceptions and attitudes of, in this case, the Easton Area School District employees. The time of the year that the survey is given could influence results. For example, the beginning of the school year may have emotions of excitement and renewal while the end of the school year could be an exhausting and stressful time preparing for exams,

promotions, graduation, and reporting. Understanding the ebb and flow of the school year should be considered when seeking employee input for strategic initiatives. Additionally, events could trigger emotions and influence attitudes. When employees are experiencing the process of their evaluations, or if certain employee groups are involved in collective bargaining, there is a possibility of influencing responses. Grievances or perceptions of negative events could influence the results. At the time of this survey, the Easton Area School District was dealing with an event surrounding the wrestling program and the subsequent report by the law firm of Florio, Perrucci, Steinhardt, and Cappelli whose offices are located in Phillipsburg, NJ.

While this survey focused on employee perceptions, subsequent surveys will be suggested later in the report to counterbalance time of year, ebb and flow of emotions and attitudes, and areas that remain important for further exploration. Regardless of the variables that may influence the results of an organization's climate, the Easton Area School District's governing body choosing to capture the collective attitudes and perceptions of the employees is a proactive step in planning for the future.

### Participation

The consultants received the list of employee email addresses from the Easton Area School District. The consultants uploaded the addresses into the survey platform, and survey invitations were sent to all employees listed. Participation was voluntary. The total number (N) of employees contacted, the number of employees who responded (NR), and the percent of employee participation (P) are listed below.

N = total number of employees (1298)

NR = employee responses (619) including responses submitted in hard copy.

P = percent response (47.7%)

“Internal surveys will generally receive a 30-40% response rate (or more) on average, compared to an average 10-15% response rate for external surveys.”

<https://www.surveymizmo.com/resources/blog/survey-response-rates/> (retrieved on September 22, 2018)

### Survey Results by Category

The consultant combined certain employee groups for this report because in some groups too few employees responded. Even though great care has been taken for the confidentiality of all employees, by combining certain employee groups, an added level of anonymity has been ensured. This report will show results for all employees. No breakout of employee groups will be discussed. This precaution is necessary to preserve the confidentiality of all employees and not to be able to single out any individual or groups of individuals. For strategic planning, the consultant can provide group identity categories for goal setting. For example, the non-faculty groups included building level administration, district level administration (excluding the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and the chief financial officer), transportation staff, custodial and maintenance staff, secretarial staff, paraprofessional staff, and other employees not listed in any of the aforementioned categories. However, for this report, the statistical analysis might expose those non-identity categories. There were 379 faculty and 240 non-faculty employees or those who chose to not identify their employment category who participated. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole percent. Italics, bold face print and spacing are used to allow for an easier reading of the report and do not indicate any level of importance to the statements.

The results of the survey provided insight into the following employee perceptions. These results were calculated based on the average responses of all employees combined.

- A) *Communication makes reference to employee perceptions about open, transparent transfer of information and dialogue between administration and faculty and staff. On a daily basis, school systems have thousands of communiques among faculty, administration, parents, students, and the community.*

Forty (40) percent of all employees strongly agree or tend to agree that communication is positive.

Forty-three (43) percent tend to disagree or strongly disagree.

Seventeen (17) percent neither agree or disagree.

- B) *Employee engagement addresses the interaction among administration, faculty, and staff as it pertains to soliciting input, trust in what is said, and active participation in organizational improvement toward goal achievement.*

Twenty-four (24) percent of all employees strongly agree or tend to agree that there is positive discourse.

Fifty-four (54) percent tend to disagree or strongly disagree.

Twenty-two (22) percent neither disagree or agree.

- C) *Beliefs about change seeks to gain insight as to how employees embrace change and how they think the leadership supports change. School organizations are not static entities. They are extremely dynamic. The number of changes that occurs with large systems can be daunting.*

Perceptions about how the overall system supports change provides insight as to how the employees may or may not embrace initiatives.

Nineteen (19) percent of all employees strongly agree or tend to agree that the overall system supports change.

Fifty-four (54) percent tend to disagree or strongly disagree.

Twenty-seven (27) percent neither disagree or agree.

- D) *Feeling appreciated centers on how employees believe they are valued by the administration. They strive to be respected and treated fairly.*

Sixty-six (66) percent of all employees strongly agree or tend to agree that the administration values them.

Seventeen (17) percent of all employees tend to disagree or strongly disagree.

Seventeen (17) percent neither disagree or agree.

- E) *Continuing with the above theme about being valued, this section deals with employee sensitivity about being part of a team sharing mutual respect which references the ideas about how the administration encourages employees, how they trust each other, how employees are treated fairly, do employees respect the administration, and do administrators have effective*

*interpersonal skills.*

Employee perceptions show that 38% of all employees strongly agree or tend to agree that respect, trust, teamwork, and administrator interpersonal skills are inherent in the organization.

Thirty-seven (37) percent of all employees tend to disagree or strongly disagree.  
Twenty-five (25) percent neither disagree or agree.

*F) This section reinforces several earlier themes and introduces new ones. The district focus on strategic planning including, but not limited to vision, mission, and beliefs, seeks perceptions about how well employees know the goals of the organization, and are those goals connected to objectives and meaningful assignments. It speaks to a climate of managing issues effectively. It explores if leaders are open to suggestions, and do employees recognize the purpose for continuous improvement through a strategic plan. Additionally, do employees feel the district goals will make Easton Area School District better and that continuous improvement processes come from positive changes.*

In general, 46% of all employees strongly agree or tend to agree that goals are known and translated into meaningful, strategic planning activities involving all staff.

Twenty-eight (28) percent of all employees tend to disagree or strongly disagree.  
Twenty-six (26) percent neither disagree or agree.

*G) Working environment focuses on employee perceptions about how their skills and experiences are appreciated and that their environment is free from hostile behaviors and fear from retaliation.*

1. These results show that 65% percent of all employees strongly agree or tend to agree that continuous improvement goals will make the EASD better and that their supervisors appreciate and respect their skills.

Seventeen (17) percent of all employees tend to disagree or strongly disagree.  
Twenty-one (21) percent neither disagree or agree.

2. Perceptions about retaliation against them shows that 21% of all employees strongly agree or tend to agree that no negative actions will be taken if they speak their mind.

Sixty-two (62) percent of all employees tend to disagree or strongly disagree.  
Seventeen (17) percent neither disagree or agree.

3. Forty-seven (47) percent of all employees strongly agree or tend to agree that they do not work in a hostile environment.

Thirty-one (31) percent of all employees tend to disagree or strongly disagree.

Twenty-two (22) percent neither disagree or agree.

*H) District governance refers to the employee perceived support by the district Board of Education in providing appropriate resources needed to educate students. These results show perceptions regarding how Board policies effectively support operations, and how responsive the Board is to employee issues.*

1. The overall perception shows that 47% percent of all employees strongly agree or tend to agree that the Board supports the education of all students, and provides appropriate resources. The employees believe that the Board policies provide organizational direction and are consistently implemented.

Twenty (20) percent of all employees tend to disagree or strongly disagree.  
Thirty-three (33) percent neither disagree or agree.

2. With regard to how amenable the Board is to employee concerns, 20% percent of all employees strongly agree or tend to agree that the Board is responsive.

Thirty-eight (38) percent of all employees tend to disagree or strongly disagree.  
Forty-two (42) percent neither disagree or agree.

## **Suggestions for Next Steps**

As previously stated, surveys are snapshots in time. A more complete impression of a system's climate requires further discussion by the stakeholders in the Easton Area School District. Multiple surveys during different points in time, over a longer time period will provide the Board with additional data to determine how the climate is changing. Influencing and guiding those changes require the establishment of baseline information necessary for a comparative study. The results of this survey provide a baseline from which the Board can make decisions about the progress toward the climate they want to see in the school system. Creating change is a lengthy process involving all stakeholders. It requires systematic planning and accountability. For areas of consideration to affect change, the consultant offers the suggestions below. By no means are these suggestions the only possible way to address the results of the survey. Nor are the consultant's interpretations an exhaustive review of the data. They are provided as a general summary to give potential ideas about the perceived climate and the variety of ways to address the survey results and strategic actions for consideration.

### **1. Initiate Strategic Processes**

The results of this survey need to be further analyzed by the Board, administration, and employees of the school system. Opinions and speculation about the results will vary. It is the opinion of the consultant that it is those who work in the district who can provide the most accurate interpretation and insight into the working conditions which they experience every day. A starting point for those discussions may begin with the results of this survey.

The leadership should discuss the benefits of having an outside consultant who can facilitate the strategic process. This independent facilitator should be one who can engage stakeholder

groups in recommending climate goals to the Board.

### **Increase Effective Communication and Engagement Strategies**

The survey results seem to give direction that communication throughout the district is an issue that needs to be addressed. While some groupings of employees feel that communication is appropriate, other employee groups want more involvement. The survey results below give credence to the idea that steps should be taken to improve communication throughout the organization.

*A) Communication makes reference to employee perceptions about open, transparent transfer of information and dialogue between administration and faculty and staff. On a daily basis, school systems have thousands of communiques among faculty, administration, parents, students, and the community.*

Forty (40) percent of all employees strongly agree or tend to agree that communication is positive.

Forty-three (43) percent tend to disagree or strongly disagree.

Seventeen (17) percent neither agree or disagree.

The two basic types of communication most prevalent in a school district are (1) transfer of information where no additional dialogue is afforded. (2) The other general type of communication establishes an open dialogue thus engaging the leadership and employees with the opportunity to share thoughts and ideas on any given topic. The survey results indicate that the latter would have a positive effect on climate. Both communication and employee engagement have a synergy that impact climate.

### **Develop Specific Goals and Planning Procedures**

Strategic planning serves many purposes, but the some of the most important considerations for planning is that it establishes leadership and accountability. District goals should set a foundation for a strategic approach to improve key elements identified by the employees of the school system. A review of the strategic plan, the mission, vision, shared beliefs, and goals is a place to start. Employees believe that goal setting is important and want to be part of the action plans.

Simply put, strategic planning is about shared leadership. It allows the school community to have an open dialogue about student achievement data, diversity, safety, school finance, technology, professional development, and a host of other areas deemed important by the stakeholders.

Ownership of the results of this survey and the district-wide analysis, along with subsequent initiatives should come from those closest to the environment. Accountability begins with all employees having a stake in the outcome of the organization's goals. Future surveys should include a wider selection of school and community representatives; however, for the present employee survey, it is their voices that need to be heard.

While there are many ways to proceed with an analysis, consideration should be given to developing a steering committee of system-wide representatives to guide the process. So that



no voice goes without the opportunity to contribute, sub-committees for each building or employee group can establish a line of communication for recommendations to be considered by the steering committee. The use of a strategic planning process to accomplish this may serve the district well.

### **Acknowledge the Perceptions of Employees About Being Appreciated and Design Ways to Recognize Them**

A key area for all is the desire to feel appreciated. Much can be determined by how employees believe they are valued by the administration. They strive to be respected and treated fairly. There are employee groups that believe that they are appreciated, especially at the building or divisional level (seventy-three (73) percent of all employees strongly agree or tend to agree that their building level administration values them). They also indicate that there may be areas to improve. Seniority, transfers, and hiring decisions could be a starting point for these discussions.

Additionally, all staff appreciate being treated professionally and attribute their perceptions by the level of interpersonal skills of their supervisors. Employees generally cite the importance of trust, continuity of engagement, and mutual respect, to name a few areas as being important to contributing to a positive culture. The results of the survey seem to indicate that these issues warrant serious and thoughtful discussion and clear goals to improve them.

With regard to senior leadership, there is a perception that they seem more isolated from the rest of the district and not as engaging. In a district the size of Easton, it becomes challenging to engage so many employees and others across the community. A perceived lack of engagement could be contributing factors to improved levels of trust, respect, and appreciation of others. Whether this is accurate or not is a worthy reflection and warrants deeper discussions with the staff.

Employees want to feel appreciated. They want to have a feeling of mutual respect. They want to be engaged in decisions that affect them, the students, and their assigned work site. Over 65% of the employees believe that continuous improvement goals, feeling appreciated, and mutual respect will make the Easton Area School District better. Discussions surrounding how to engage each other in a shared role is a worthy pursuit in improving climate.

### **Recognize the Challenges of Maintaining a Positive Working Environment and Establish Procedures to Actively Engage Employees in Meeting Those Challenges**

For this survey, working environment focuses on employee perceptions about how their skills and experiences are appreciated and that their environment is free from hostile behaviors and fear from retaliation. While over 65% of employees believe that continuous attention to district goals will make Easton a better school district than it already is, there is a wide discrepancy in perceptions about the working environment being able to support those goals. As stated in the early discussion about climate surveys, many variables can influence employee perceptions. It already has been mentioned that the “ebb and flow” of a school year or events can influence perceptions. Several employee comments, supported by the report of the law firm of Florio, Perrucci, Steinhardt, and Cappelli seem to suggest that hostile working conditions (consultant's interpretation) contribute to the current climate in the district. At the time of this survey, the

Easton Area School District continues to deal with the aftermath of the event surrounding the wrestling program.

Although the survey results provide additional data to this event, and other variables need to be explored, the aftermath of the events surrounding the wrestling program leaves no doubt it has had an impact on the climate in Easton. It is worth, in this discussion, to repeat the survey results here.

Forty-seven (47) percent of all employees strongly agree or tend to agree that they do not work in a hostile environment.

Thirty-one (31) percent of all employees tend to disagree or strongly disagree.

Twenty-two (22) percent neither disagree or agree.

Perceptions about retaliation against them shows that 21% of all employees strongly agree or tend to agree that no negative actions will be taken if they speak their mind.

Sixty-two (62) percent of all employees tend to disagree or strongly disagree.

Seventeen (17) percent neither disagree or agree.

Forty-seven percent of all employees believe they do not work in a hostile environment, yet only twenty-one percent believe that no negative actions will be taken if they speak their mind. One might expect that the two percentages should be more closely aligned. However, the data suggests that there is a more positive relationship at the building level than at a district-wide level. Regardless about how employees, or others for that matter, want to interpret these results, they are serious issues that need the attention of all involved in the district.

### **Develop Communication Strategies that Inform the Employees about the Governance of the Organization**

Generally, employee's perceptions show that over 60% believe the Easton Area Board of Education supports the education of all students, yet only 47% see that support in terms of providing appropriate resources. While the difference between these two statements seems wide, further review about the concept of "support" needs clarification. Here may be an example that in communication, one party has defined the meaning of "support" one way and the other party has a different interpretation. How the Board shares its decisions and why those decisions are made, may provide an avenue for closing the interpretation gap.

Board policies and the implementation of policies may be overwhelming when one considers the volume of policies, the interpretations and intended meaning, and how the policies affect employees and operations. The survey results in these areas seem to indicate a need for further clarification and discussion.

Finally, employee perceptions regarding how the board receives and acts on employee concerns shows that only 20% feel the board is responsive to employee issues. Further discussion is necessary to determine if these concerns refer to collective bargaining agreements, the chain of command, or the concerns raised by individuals. Board responsibilities usually involve a macro, legislative involvement, and not a micro-management involvement. All stakeholders

may benefit from a clear understanding of roles and how concerns are addressed. However issues are raised, a clear process needs to be discussed, and if one exists, then this may be a starting point to shared engagement.

## **2. Expand the Survey Topics for Data Collection**

Understandably, the Board wanted to gain insight into employee attitudes and working conditions. It is suggested that the Board consider future surveys that seek input from parents, students, and the community. While future surveys can continue to be broad-based for progress monitoring and comparison to the baseline results of this survey, further discussion needs to include areas such as diversity, school and community safety, parental engagement, academic achievement, curriculum, and other areas that may be important to the Easton Area School District for a strategic planning process.

## **3. Closing Remarks**

It cannot be emphasized enough that this survey is the collection of employee perceptions at a specific point in time. Although the results of this survey are rich with data, no one survey can provide enough data to make any final decisions without careful discussion and deliberation into the issues at hand. The responses do give a starting point for change. Understanding the motivation behind responses can come from honest, meaningful engagement of stakeholders. This particular survey provides a baseline of data from which the results of future surveys can be compared. Progress towards the climate desired by all affiliated with the EASD can be measured to this baseline. The process is complex and takes time to reach conclusions leading to the important goals necessary to influence a positive climate. Discussions should lead to measurable action plans, persons responsible to see the actions are carried out, and accountability for the results of those action plans. Action plans need more than verbal support. Dedicated resources are necessary for the success of any strategic initiative if institutional change is to be realized. All discussions should include the vision of a culture sought by the stakeholders that establishes the working conditions necessary for change to occur.

Finally, it is apparent that employees who participated in this survey did so because of the deep respect for their profession and strong desire to be part of a positive climate. There were positive remarks and critical remarks. The road to change is difficult and bumpy. Not everyone will agree with employee perceptions. Respecting them is more important than agreeing with them. Pursuing the goals desired forces us to face the uncomfortable results of listening to each other. Employee perceptions deserve to be heard and discussed. Their voices are part of a collective representing the need for advancing the type of climate conducive for the education of all students.

Respectfully,  
Angelo R. Senese, Ed.D.